Stephen Thornton, Associate Professor of Social Studies and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University asserts “what is needed is a principled and creative approach to methods selection” (p. 82). His remark captures the focus of this literature review. Over the past several decades development of instructional methods in the content area of social studies has withered, while such development has flourished in the content areas of math, ELA and science; all of which are under more scrutiny as a result of high stakes testing. In fact, research grants have been directed to improving instructional strategies in these areas, as our nation’s educational leaders seek to meet more standards. Although the standards movement of the 1990’s resulted in a number of changes to social studies curricula, conflict within the particular disciplines of social studies continues to frustrate progress in this area. Evans (2004) points out that the “social studies wars”, in which the various factions have argued over “purposes, content, methods and theoretical foundations,” continue to rage as social studies continues to be mired in teacher-centered instruction. More importantly, a gap continues to persist between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum.

Therefore it is evident that teachers of social studies would greatly benefit from professional development in instructional methods. Nel Noddings contends that “no subject in the school curriculum is more important than social studies because it involves us most directly in the study of our earth as the home of human activity and the effects of that activity on all life” (In Thornton, 2005, p. ix). We are also reminded of Dewey and his belief, “the true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems” (p. 205). Both Dewey (1916) and Noddings (1995) assert that schools play a vital role in society. By engaging in dialogue about what should be taught and how it should be taught “schools can help society to develop individuals who have a clearer, more responsible sense of what it means to live in a democratic community” (Noddings, 1995, p. 39). Given the importance of social studies in the American curriculum, we must ensure that our students are engaged in this curriculum.

Furthermore, Thornton (1994) suggests that there needs to be a change in the way content is wedded to pedagogical practices. He asserts that “the new curriculum guidelines are unlikely to effect profound changes in how teachers teach without accompanying changes in pedagogy and outlook among teachers” (p. 243). Cuban (1992) noted there is a “scarcity of description and analyses of social studies classrooms and an abundance of advice on how social studies teachers should teach” (p. 199). However, over the past decade or so, a number of studies have been conducted in social studies classrooms that do examine teaching and learning. The intent of this literature review is to look at some of the research on changes in instructional practices in social studies classrooms that have resulted in gains in student achievement. With this data in hand, the hope is to change the actual classroom practice of many more social studies teachers.

Several studies have been conducted that provide evidence of student learning in social studies classrooms where student-centered learning in taking place. In fact, one qualitative study presented by Catherine A. Franklin (In Fosnot, 2005, p. 246-262) revealed the ability of students to construct their own learning in a “curricular drama”. Franklin created an “ongoing legislative drama” with her eighth grade students over the course of eight weeks. Franklin made a clear distinction between curricular drama and educational drama or simulations. Curricular drama “is co-constructed by both the students and their teacher” (p. 247). Most importantly, Franklin points out that “(c)urricular drama forms a bridge that links the challenge of teaching and learning content to the authentic interests, concerns, and energies of the students” (p. 247). These kinds of activities in which students are engaged in such active inquiry and reflection bring to mind the type of learning that Duckworth (2006) makes a strong case for this in her book, *“The Having of Wonderful Ideas and Other Essays on Teaching and learning.* According to Franklin, “The co-constructed curriculum drama was a messy and organic process” ((In Fosnot, 2005, p. 260). In this process, students were able to connect with others and to be able to “generate complex understandings about the legislative branch of government” (p. 260).

Another study conducted by Susan De La Paz (2005) in which 8th grade students of varying ability levels and diverse ethnic backgrounds were provided historical reasoning instruction, as well as writing instruction. The results were: “effect sizes were greatest for essay length, persuasiveness, and number of arguments (1.17 to 1.23). The effect size for accuracy of historical content was relatively low (0.57), yet remained statistically significant” (De La Paz, 2005, p. 152). De La Paz concluded that the results “support the claim that the combined historical reasoning and writing instruction was responsible for the improvement in students’ final papers” (p. 152).

Bruce VanSledright (2002) conducted a study with 23 5th graders in a large elementary school in which he as researcher-practitioner taught American history for four months using a pedagogical method that emphasized “investigating and practicing history” (p. 131). VanSledright collected a variety of data in order to assess his practice. The data included written responses in their “social studies logs”, demographic data, as well as data from 8 “primary informants” about “their views of history and what historical investigators do” (p. 136). Also the data included the results from two performance tasks that were conducted by VanSledright before he began teaching and one after he finished his instruction. The data revealed that the “students developed a specialized vocabulary and discourse for talking about historical thinking and analyses (primary sources, secondary sources, perspective, bias, evidence), as they learned to examine accounts more intertextually” (p. 149).

The study by Fred Newmann (1990) examined the promotion of higher order thinking by high school social studies teachers. The study was conducted in five high school social studies departments. The data included interviews with department chairs, teachers, and students...

A more recent study by Monte-Sano (2008) on the teaching of historical writing instruction also provides evidence that the instructional techniques of the teachers determined the growth of the students in the area of evidence-based historical writing. The following practices promoted growth: approaching history as evidence-based interpretation; reading historical texts and considering them as “interpretations, supporting reading comprehension and historical thinking; asking student to develop interpretations and support them with evidence and using direct instruction, guided practice, independent practice and feedback to teach evidence-based writing” (p. 1045). ....

Paquin and Barfurth (2007) conducted a study in Canada with 125 Francophone teachers on the use of the internet and museum websites to encourage learning for both elementary and secondary level students of social studies. ….

Caron, E. (2004) examined six second-year middle and high school social studies as they attempted to implement an issues-centered instructional model….”Although teachers reported their students to be more thoughtfully engaged and more participatory under an issues-centered model, significant practical dilemmas emerged as they struggled in creating and carrying out coherent, issues-based instructional units while remaining committed to content coverage” (p. 4)….

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